Appendix II: Typological Considerations of Reconstructed Proto-Algic Phonology

Whatever its other strengths or weaknesses, the reconstructed Proto-Algonquian phonological systems set up here should not be very controversial from a typological standpoint. My proposed Proto-Algic (PAc) vowel system—reduced **ă, **ə and full **i:, **æ:, **ɑ (and possibly **u:)—is a bit more unusual, though, so it’s worth briefly addressing its typological plausibility. There are a good number of languages with two short or reduced central vowels /a, ə/, so that aspect is not odd. Additionally, /i, u, æ, a/ is attested, and the smaller full vowel inventory /i, æ, a/, while rare, is also attested, so while the precise combination of vowels proposed here is not, to my knowledge, directly attested, there is no reason to doubt its typological plausibility.

In particular, several Salish languages and one reconstructible stage of pre-Deg Xinag (formerly known as “Ingalik”), a Dene (Athabaskan) language of Alaska, had/have almost identical inventories in all respects to the one reconstructed here for PAc. Musqueam Halkomelem has full /i, æ, a/ (← Proto-Salish *i, *a, *u) and a rare /u/ + contrastive length, plus reduced /ɔ/ (Suttles 2004:9-13); and Tillamook had an almost identical inventory to Musqueam, full /i, æ, a/ and reduced /ə̆/, but with no /u/ or contrastive vowel length (Thompson and Thompson 1966). The Musqueam and Tillamook inventories are virtually identical to that which I reconstruct for PAc, other than the lack of a second reduced vowel.

Meanwhile, as noted in Appendix VI on reduced vowel systems, Proto-Dene had four full vowels */i:, u:, æ:, a:/, written <*i>, <*u>, <*e>, <*a>, and three reduced vowels written <*ʊ>, <*ə>, and <*ə> or <*ɑ> representing something like */ʊ̆, ə̆, ɐ̆/. Deg Xinag ultimately developed the rather unusual inventory of full /ɛ, ɔ, a/ + reduced /ʊ̞, ə̟̆/ (or /ʊ̞/ instead of /ʊ̟̆/). (Details on the Deg Xinag developments are from Hargus 2010b:22-30. See Appendix VI for additional information and citations on Dene and Deg Xinag.) The evidence provided by the sound correspondences involved and by similarities in neighboring Dena’ina suggests that the first step in the evolution toward this system, other than possibly the rounding/raising of *a, was the fronting of Proto-Dene *u to pre-Deg Xinag (PDX) *i (merging with Proto-Dene *i); this vowel later lowered to /ɛ/, but Dena’ina reflects an intermediate stage in which it is /ɪ/. Thus, at one relatively early stage, the PDX vowel system was probably: “full” */i:, æ:, ɔ:/ + “reduced” */ʊ̟̆, ə̟̆, ɐ̟̆/. This is also incredibly close to my reconstructed PAc system, including a somewhat lowered full high vowel and the reduced schwa being phonetically fronted in some contexts, as well as the rounding of the low back vowel which occurred many times in Algic. The only substantive differences are the fact that the PDX reflex of *ɑ was not fully open, and the existence of a third, rounded reduced vowel.

The pre-Deg Xinag reconstruction seems reasonably secure, and this combined with the directly attested Tillamook and Musqueam inventories provides strong reassurance that the posited Proto-Algic vowel system is typologically plausible.
Note too that the PDX system was arrived at in part by fronting a [u]-sound. An earlier step with *u still present is the Proto-Dene system itself, which is reflected unchanged in some modern Dene languages such as some dialects of Koyukon—this would correspond closely to the alternative reconstruction in which PAc had **u:. Additionally, the intermediate step in such a process would have been something like *[i], so at one point early PDX probably had the phonetic full vowel inventory *[iː, ɨː, æː, ɒː]. Thus, if PAc must be reconstructed with an additional full vowel **i:, PDX would helpfully provide precedent for this as well!

Sources Used

(“IJAL” = International Journal of American Linguistics)


